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What It Was Like Going on a Safari Amid the Coronavirus Pandemic

Here's everything you need to know about going on an African safari during the coronavirus pandemic, according to a traveler who went.

BY **KWIN MOSBY** | JANUARY 02, 2021

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The pilot, co-pilot and passengers must wear face masks on planes, including this one, a privately chartered East African bush plane. | CREDIT: KWIN MOSBY

Editor's Note: Those who choose to travel are strongly encouraged to check local government restrictions, rules, and safety measures related to COVID-19 and take personal comfort levels and health conditions into consideration before departure.

Whether or not you plan to travel for a while, a safari in Kenya might be on your travel bucket list. This once-in-a-lifetime trip presents the opportunity to witness the Big Five — lions, leopards, elephants, rhinos, and Cape buffalos — in their natural habitat, with the additional perk of having Mount Kilimanjaro or Mount Kenya as the backdrop.

Like most countries, Kenya has not gone untouched by the COVID-19 pandemic, but President Uhuru Kenyatta and the country's Ministry of Health have taken necessary steps to keep domestic and international travelers safe, including an imposed curfew and mask-wearing mandate. Remember, your safety comes first, but if you're ready to travel again, here's what you need to know before planning a safari in Kenya right now.

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Is Kenya safe to visit right now?

As is the case with any trip-planning process, it's important to check the travel advisories listed on the U.S. Department of State's website. At the time this article was written, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends avoiding all travel to Kenya, noting that travel to the country may increase your chance of spreading or getting COVID-19.

As of Dec. 28, 2020, there were 93,923 confirmed cases and 1,658 deaths in Kenya, according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. To control the spread of the pandemic, the Kenyan government halted all domestic and international flights in March. On July 1, domestic airlines resumed flights, and on Aug. 1, international flights were reinstituted.

The country is open to international travelers, with health and safety measures in place. President Kenyatta and the Ministry of Health require all locals and travelers to a wear mask. Tourists should expect to end their night a little earlier than normal, too. A federal-mandated curfew has been set from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. through Jan. 3, 2021, which includes all bars and restaurants. Large gatherings, meetings, and conferences of more than 15 people are also prohibited.

Do locals support tourists visiting Kenya right now?

Tourism in Kenya grew more than $2 million, raking in $1.6 billion in 2019, but in 2020, COVID-19 has dramatically impacted the industry's revenue, and thousands of travel-related companies and employees have been hit hard. Safari director Kitonyi "George" Kamonde has worked for Micato Safaris for 10 years. Prior to the pandemic, he worked back-to-back game drives, but since March, he has only guided two groups — one in October and another in December, which I happened to be on. Kamonde feels and sees the impact of the virus on his colleagues.

"Right now, most lodges are only working at 50% capacity, and many people are on unpaid leave," said Kamonde. He does think that federal protocols and curfews have helped decrease the number of COVID-19 cases. "People were already living from paycheck to paycheck before the virus. People are really hurting," said Kamonde.

Left: Seal on the outside of the door when guests at Hemingways Nairobi enter their room for the first time. Right: Micato Safaris provide a bag of goodies to keep travelers safe, which include KN95 masks which are required for private bush flights. | CREDIT: KWIN MOSBY

In addition to Kenya's tourism-related employees taking a hit, the pandemic has also made it difficult to maintain valuable relationships with locals, such as the Maasai community, an indigenous ethic group that lives in central and southern Kenya. The Maasai community is an important part of Kenya's tourism economy. Several Maasai work at hotels and/or for tour companies. It has become a synergic trade-off — tourists get the unique experience of learning about the local Maasai people and their culture, while the community benefits from the relationship with the Kenyan government and wildlife conservancy groups.

Most locals believe there is a delicate balance between keeping all Kenyans safe and helping a battered tourism economy stay afloat. And there are signs that interest in Kenya is returning — albeit slowly. Although cautiously optimistic, and rightfully so, Thorburn Cattermole, manager at Sand River Masai Mara, believes better days are ahead. "I've started to see an increase in travelers, especially Americans, in November," he said. "It's great to hear American voices again."

What do you need to do before traveling to Kenya?

All passengers arriving in Kenya must take a PCR (polymerase chain reaction)

COVID-19 test and have proof of their negative results 96 hours prior to their arrival. The timing must be exact. For example, my plane's wheels were expected to touch down in Nairobi on Sunday at 11:55 p.m. So, I took my test sample on Wednesday at 5 p.m., 96 hours prior to my arrival time in Nairobi, to allow for some wiggle room in case the flight was delayed.

For the PCR test, I strongly recommend using The COVID Consultants, a mail-in service that guarantees a 24- to 48-hour turnaround. Unlike some tests, you will have to pay $219, but some tour companies reimburse travelers for the hefty fee. I also recommend taking a second PCR test as a backup to help relieve any anxiety you may have, in case your test results don't come back in time. U.S. citizens who do not have a test may not be allowed to board the departing flight or denied entry in Kenya, so plan ahead and make sure you accurately calculate the timing of your test.

After receiving your negative COVID-19 test results, all international travelers must fill out the Kenyan Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Health Surveillance Form online. In addition to asking pertinent passport and travel questions, the form inquires about your current health status as it relates to the coronavirus.

Once you have successfully submitted the online questionnaire, you will receive a QR code to download as a PDF. Print as many copies as you think you might need. If you submit your form online and receive a blank page for your QR code, don't worry — simply fill out the form again using a different browser, preferably Chrome.

U.S. citizens will also have to apply for an eVisa to pass through customs in Kenya. A tourist visa costs $50, and you will be required to set up an account first. After submitting your online application, check periodically to see if it was approved. Unfortunately, you will not receive an e-mail notification regarding your approval, but once you are confirmed, print a copy to show the Kenyan customs officer upon arrival in Nairobi.

In addition to an eVisa, negative COVID-19 test results, and a QR code obtained from filling out the Health Surveillance Form, travelers heading to Kenya should consider a visit to their primary physician to be vaccinated for a few life-threatening diseases, such as yellow fever and malaria. No immunizations are required to enter Kenya if you are arriving from the U.S., Canada, or Europe, but it's always a good idea to take extra steps to stay healthy and enjoy your trip. For the yellow fever vaccination, you can get a shot (YF-Vax or Stamaril) that takes about 10 days to become effective — something to keep in mind when planning ahead. And to ward off malaria, your doctor may advise you take an antimalarial drug, like atovaquone/proguanil, chloroquine, primaquine, or doxycycline. (I started taking the latter three days before departing and continued during and after my trip.) Again, see your doctor for more thorough details.

What is it like flying to and from Kenya right right now?

Kwin in a Q-Suite onboard Qatar Airways wearing required face shield and mask. | CREDIT: KWIN MOSBY

My round-trip flight was booked through Qatar Airways, with a connecting flight at the airline's hub, Hamad International Airport, in Doha, Qatar. Prior to arriving at Dulles International Airport (IAD), I was required to fill out a Passenger Consent Form, which provided information about my negative PCR test results as well as an agreement to abide by the airline's health and safety guidelines. At the airport, all the self-service kiosks were gone. Instead, I had to check in with a Qatar Airways customer service representative, who was shielded by plexiglass.

Before boarding, all passengers also received a face shield, which we were required to wear along with a mask. We were allowed to remove the shield after boarding and deplaning at a connecting airport.

Travel with Confidence
Protective Kit
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Travel with Confidence Package given passengers on Qatar Airways | CREDIT: KWIN MOSBY

Once on board, passengers were supplied with a “Travel with Confidence” pouch, which included a pair of latex gloves, hand sanitizer, and a mask. Some passengers in business class (Qsuites) were also allowed to remove their masks. Keep in mind that Qsuites are not like regular airplane seats, since they offer private sections with sliding partitions to separate passengers from one another.

That being said, the airline had several safety precautions and procedures in place, including supplying PPE (personal protective equipment) to its cabin crew (e.g., protective gowns that fit over uniforms, safety glasses, gloves, and masks). Qatar Airways also uses an Ultraviolet Cabin System as a non-chemical treatment for cleaning aircraft seats, surfaces, and cabins. The airline claims they have the most advanced air filtration systems, equipped with industrial-size HPA filters that remove 99.97% of viral and bacterial contaminants from recirculated air, protecting passengers against infection. And no need to worry about the safety of your in-flight meals, either — everything is served covered or wrapped.

What happens when you land in Kenya?

At Hamad International Airport, where I was catching my connecting flight, all passengers were asked to take off their face shields. As we lined up, we had to pass a staff member wearing a smart screening helmet, so he could take our temperatures via infrared imaging. In addition to mandatory face masks, socially distanced seating at the gates, and contactless hand sanitizer dispensers, the airport also had UV-C disinfectant robots manning areas with high passenger volumes.

Jomo Kenyatta International Airport in Nairobi, Kenya, implemented proper health and safety protocols, too. Prior to landing, flight attendants informed us that we would be shuttled to customs via buses, but in small groups of no more than 10 to 15 people at a time. The deplaning process may have taken longer than usual, but it was designed to keep passengers safe and distanced.

At the airport entrance, a customs officer checked to see if each passenger had the required COVID-19 Health Surveillance QR code; another officer, wearing a smart screening helmet, took our temperature using contactless thermal scanning and infrared imaging — similar to what was used in Doha. After proceeding to a short customs line, an officer requested to see my passport, eVisa, confirmation QR code, negative PCR test results, and the Coronavirus Quarantine Declaration form that airline attendants gave passengers upon checking in.

It’s strongly advised that you make a few copies of all your necessary paperwork, as you may have to show certain forms multiple times to airline staff, airport security, and customs officers along the way.

My trip was booked through Micato Safaris, so a representative met me and a few other colleagues at customs to help guide us through the process in case any issues arose. At the van, the driver sanitized all luggage before loading it in, and passengers were provided with hand sanitizer before boarding the vehicle.

What is it like staying at a hotel in Kenya right now?

Before entering the chic Hemingways Nairobi hotel, a masked guard took everyone’s temperature, and at the main entrance to the lobby, there were a few sanitary stations — small sinks to wash your hands as well as hand sanitizer — to keep guests germ-free.

In addition to providing a 24-hour doctor for guests, all hotel employees are required to take a COVID-19 test on a regular basis, as well as receive training on health and hygiene protocols from an experienced medical practitioner. Employees receive ongoing training to ensure they are knowledgeable on preventative measures used to deter the spread of the virus. For example, there's no turndown service unless a guest requests it, as well as no housekeeping while a guest is occupying a room or suite.

During my stay, staff members were required to wear face coverings at all times, and guests had to wear masks while moving around public areas, such as the lobby and at the on-site restaurant when not eating. All public spaces, as well as high-touch areas like doorknobs, were cleaned twice daily. It's also worth mentioning that the hotel's large doors and floor-to-ceiling windows were usually left open to allow for proper air circulation.

What is it like staying at a safari camp or lodge in Kenya right now?

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Micato Safaris staff member disinfects luggage prior to boarding and after landing of the private bush planes to different camps in Kenya. | CREDIT: KWIN MOSBY

It was a 45-minute charter plane ride to the Amboseli airstrip and a 45-minute drive to the Elewana Tortilis Camp — give or take a few additional minutes to stop and see the wildlife along the way. Hand sanitizer was provided to all guests before stepping onto the van transfer, and luggage was sprayed with a disinfectant. Staff and guests were masked during the drive to the safari camp.

Kwin Mosby socially distancing with two Maasai men at Elewana Tortilis Camp Amboseli. | CREDIT: KWIN MOSBY

Similar to the hotel, a camp staff member waited at the main entrance to take everyone's temperature and pointed out nearby hand sanitizers for convenience. Once we were cleared, an employee welcomed us to the camp with a glass of freshly squeezed fruit juice.

As for game drives, there was one in the morning and another in the evening. Modified Toyota Land Cruisers with raised canopy tops and open-air jeeps were used to allow passengers to stand up, check out the wildlife, get some fresh air, and take beautiful photos of Mount Kilimanjaro. These same safety protocols were also followed at Elewana Kifaru House, located near the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, and at Elewana Sand River, near the Maasai Mara National Reserve.

It should be noted that hotel and camp managers, as well as tour guides, can be instrumental in arranging a COVID-19 PCR test before leaving Kenya. In some cases, tour companies may include it as part of the safari package or as an added-value perk to ensure that you return home healthy.

What can you do in Kenya right now?

Travelers expecting a pre-pandemic experience are out of luck. At the Sheldrick

Elephant and Rhino Orphanage, for example, private groups are only allowed by request and once a day at 3 p.m. Prior to the pandemic, more than 500 people flocked to the animal orphanage to see baby elephants and Maxwell, the blind white rhino. Now, group sizes are reduced to only 10 people per day for a more intimate experience.

Meanwhile, at the African Fund for Endangered Wildlife — Giraffe Centre, on-site staff checks each person's temperature, and visitors are required to wash hands before feeding or getting close to the giraffes. However, visitors can expect shorter lines and fewer crowds at popular tourist attractions.

In addition to tourist attractions, safari excursions and activities may be temporarily canceled or modified to keep the virus at bay. For example, a chat with Meoli, the son of the chief of the Maasai community in Amboseli, is usually scheduled for guests in lieu of visiting the village. It's a move tour companies and camps are taking to keep indigenous people safe. Tourists will have to wait to witness and participate in the famous Maasai jumping dance known as the *adamu*, part of the Eunoto ceremony, during which boys transition to men. If one of your main goals is to participate in immersive experiences that involve locals, you may want to hold off on visiting Kenya until these offerings resume after the pandemic.